

Boot camp harvests fresh produce



VIENNA GARDEN

Photo by Paul Newton

Correctional Officer Penny Poole helps inmates from the Dixon Springs Impact Incarceration Center collect green beans on the center's campus on Wednesday, Aug. 28, 2013, in Dixon Springs, Ill. (Paul Newton / The Southern)

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DIXON SPRINGS — Inmates at Dixon Springs Impact Incarceration Program have dabbled with gardening since 2003.

But now, gardening has become a full-scale production with 3 acres of cultivated produce yielding pounds by the hundreds. And much of the prison grounds have been landscaped, including an outdoor area where graduations are conducted.

“It’s a worthwhile cause. There’s a definite purpose and feeling of accomplishment they get. What they are doing is making an impact on someone’s life,” said prison Superintendent Jason Henton about the 20 female inmates who tend the produce gardens where an assortment of vegetables from green leafy products to staples such as potatoes and corn are grown. There are also cantaloupe and watermelon.

A major distribution avenue has been established with product going to senior citizens, homeless shelters, food pantries and school districts in Vienna and Harrisburg.

“It’s a very good thing. This is our first year,” said Vienna High School Principal Patrick Harner about getting free corn on the cob and green beans from the prison gardens to include with school lunches.

Garden produce is used also to feed the inmates who range in age from 18 to 35 and have committed nonviolent offenses. The 120 to 180 day sentences, if successfully completed, replace prison terms.

Circuit court judges recommend inmates to the paramilitary program, in which work is core, Henton said.

Corrections officer Penny Poole said gardening is a new experience for many of the inmates raised in inner city neighborhoods.

“They are surprised to find out how these little plants feed us. Once they start eating this food, they love it,” Poole said.

A 34-year-old female inmate from Chicago whose last name is Weatherspoon (inmates do not use first names with staff or visiting journalists) said she wants to continue gardening when she is released.

“It’s such a positive experience and very recreational,” she said.

Another 20-year-old female inmate from Champaign describes produce gardening as “a lot of hard work.” But, she gets satisfaction from knowing where the produce is going.

“I’ve had to eat at food banks. It’s nice to give back and donate,” she said.

All garden and ground work is done by hand.

“There is no garden tiller. We use rakes, shovels and hoes,” Henton said.

There are plans to expand to 5 acres for the 2014 growing season. And other green-friendly plans are being devised for the future

scott.fitzgerald@thesouthern.com